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## THE PHILOSOPHY OF EMILE BOUTROUX

**B**Y THE DEATH of Emile Boutroux (which occurred in November of 1921), contemporary French philosophy has been deprived of one of its champions and international thought laments the loss of a valued thinker. Boutroux preserved a wonderful vitality, and an alertness of mind which was astonishing for one who was seventy-six. Shortly before his death the present writer had the pleasure of visiting him in Paris and noted his keen interest in social events and in approaching developments in political thought. It was characteristic of Boutroux to look to the future for inspiration rather than to the past. His mind seemed a particularly good manifestation of that *élan vital* of which his pupil Henri Bergson has written, being intensely active and pushing as it were continually "*en avant*."

Boutroux's mental pilgrimage throws an interesting light upon modern French philosophy. He was a notable thinker of the group whose ideas came to dominate French thought in the last quarter of the last century, the New Spiritualists or Idealists. These later thinkers rejected, not only the doctrines of materialism, naturalism and positivism, against which they took the field in determined opposition, but also the older idealism, and vague teachings of Cousin and his followers. The Eclecticism of Cousin influenced a whole generation of his countrymen. He upheld spiritual ideals, but his philosophy was very largely

an importation from a foreign country. He had spent some years in Germany and incorporated the doctrines of Schelling and Hegel along with other ideas from the ancients to form a romantic idealism. With this he combined certain doctrines which came from the Scottish school of common sense. By this wide interest, we must admit, Cousin did much to establish and encourage the study of the history of philosophy. At times, however, it seems that he was prone to confuse the history of philosophy with philosophy itself. There is perhaps no branch of science or art so intimately bound up with its own history as is philosophy, but we must certainly beware of substituting an historical survey of problems for an actual handling of those problems themselves. Cousin's own aim was to found a metaphysics spiritual in character, based upon psychology. The chief defect in his own philosophy was simple but disastrous. The older idealism had no place within it for positive science. Philosophizing was to be dependent upon introspection. Now it was precisely because of this vagueness in Cousin's teaching that such a welcome was accorded by many minds to the positivism of Comte.

In Comte, modern science made a claim to consideration by philosophers. Much of Comte's science has been surpassed, his neglect of psychology (and ethics) was a serious defect. His dogmatism called forth the denunciations of the great thinker Charles Renouvier. The several currents of development, however, in France did not follow out Renouvier's *néo criticisme* and *personnalisme*. He and Comte share between them the highest honors of the century in France as far as philosophy is concerned, but neither were professional, academic teachers in the University and for this reason their doctrines came but slowly before the French public.

An important event occurred in the very year of Cousin's death, an event which heralded the development of

the best that was to be in the intellectual life of the century. This event was the foundation of the New Spiritualism, by Ravaisson's celebrated manifesto to idealists, for such was his *Rapport sur la philosophie dans le dixneuvième Siècle* issued in 1867 for the "Exposition Universelle" at the request of the French Ministry of Education. Ravaisson had at an earlier date opposed Cousin by his praise of Maine de Biran. Cousin was so annoyed by Ravaisson's criticism that he excluded him from the Institute.

Ravaisson's Report laid the foundations of a new Idealism and dealt a blow to both the eclectic school of Cousin and to the followers of Auguste Comte. Ravaisson himself wrote little but his influence was powerful and ultimately made itself felt upon the minds of the younger men in the University of Paris, notably, Lachelier, Boutroux and Bergson. A noble tribute to his memory was given by this last thinker when he took Ravaisson's place at the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques* in 1904.

It was Ravaisson's chief merit that he was able to show that the utter inadequacy of Cousin's vague idealism lay in its premature assumptions, its scorn of science and the lack of the discipline which comes from a study of the positive sciences. Ravaisson saw that a valid idealism must not scorn science, but work along with it; even if it finds science inadequate it will not judge it false.

With this inspiration from Ravaisson, Lachelier continued the expression of the New Spiritual Philosophy in his brilliant little thesis on "Induction," and the important article "Psychology and Metaphysics" which attempted what Cousin had been unable to effect. Lachelier finds the pure mechanism of efficient causes inadequate to explain reality. Some principle of final causes operates, and an understanding of this is, he shows, necessary for philosophy. Only by realizing the need for an outlook and interpretations beyond the purely scientific can philosophy pro-

ceed. Such a procedure involves a certain critique of science, a discussion of spiritual values, and of the possibility of freedom.

It was at this point that Boutroux took up the subject and made his influence felt. He appeared upon the philosophical field and entered the arena of discussion at a critical and interesting time. Science, philosophy and religion were each endeavoring to justify their existence. The rigorous positivism of Taine differed from that of Comte. Its narrowness and dogmatism appeared crushingly untrue to some souls. A real crisis had arrived in French thought, a conflict between the dogmatism of finalism of science on the one hand and the claim of man's spirit and the assertion of his beliefs on the other. It was a conflict of naturalism, *la science v. la conscience*. Into this intellectual *milieu* came Boutroux.

Born in the department of the Seine in 1845, he had been through the best schools of Paris, the Lycée Henri-Quatre, the Ecole Normale Supérieure and the Sorbonne. After taking his "agrégation" in philosophy he, like Cousin, passed for a time under the influence of German thought and culture. He went, just prior to the Franco-Prussian War, to Heidelberg, where he studied under Zeller, the great authority on Greek philosophy, part of whose work he later translated for his own countrymen. Already young Boutroux observed a change in Germany from the days of Cousin. He felt a foreboding as he saw that the Germany of Goethe and other inspirers of the human race had given place to a less refined spirit, born of materialism and imperialism, and dragging along a third power, militarism, to complete her trio of disgraces.

Returning to France, Boutroux presented his Thesis *Sur la Contingence des Lois de la Nature* and obtained his *Docteur ès Lettres* degree in 1874. This thesis, which was published in 1879, was dedicated to Ravaisson. This is a

significant indication of Boutroux's position. He was to throw his influence on the side of the New Spiritualist movement begun by Ravaisson and carried forward by Lachelier. To make clear how he did this is the purpose of this paper. Before passing from his career, however, we may observe that after teaching philosophy at Caen, Montpellier, Nancy, then at the Ecole Normale, he became Professor of Philosophy and of the History of Philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1888. Then in 1902 he became Director of the institution known as the "Fondation Thiers" or "Institut Thiers," where about a score of picked men from the University carry on research work in various pursuits, both literary and scientific, living a communal life for three years.

By this time Boutroux had an international reputation and was consequently appointed Gifford Lecturer for 1904-5. He delivered courses of lectures in Scotland on "La Nature" and on "L'Esprit," but these lectures have not been published. At the International Congress of Philosophy held in 1908 at Heidelberg, Boutroux gave a paper on "French Philosophy since 1867." He selected this date because it enabled him to carry on his survey from the point where Ravaisson had concluded his "Report." He succeeded in showing that French thought in the closing years of the century merited the highest attention of serious students of human thought. In the same year he issued his *Science and Religion in Contemporary Philosophy*, translated into English the following year, and in this book many of his views on Nature and Spirit find their expression. He then became President of the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques* and in 1914 was elected to the "*Académie française*." He delivered the Hertz Lecture to the British Academy in the same year, taking as his subject "Certitude and Truth." This, along with other papers dealing with German political and intellectual de-

velopment, was published during the war (1916) in a collected volume under the title *Philosophy and War*. The close of the war brought out a false report of his death. The French press contained long obituary notices. In 1919 his wife died. It is worth noticing that she was a sister of Henri Poincaré, the eminent French mathematician. Pierre Boutroux, the illustrious son, now holds the Chair of Mathematical Science at the Sorbonne. Emile Boutroux, a beloved and respected figure in French life and thought, passed away in November of 1921.

The particular work he performed, his place in philosophical thought, can only be appreciated when one has grasped the precise nature of the intellectual environment in which he found himself as a young man. This having been shown by tracing the development from Cousin, onwards through Comte and Renouvier to Ravaisson and Lachelier, we can now see how Boutroux's thought opened up the way for that of Bergson, Le Roy and Blondel.

The new spiritualist philosophers had set the notion of freedom and of the spontaneity of the spirit in the forefront of their philosophy as watchwords in the intellectual fight. Under the work and influence of Boutroux, these ideas were further emphasized and worked out more definitely to a position which assumes a critical attitude to the dogmatism of modern science and establishes a contingency in all things. Boutroux's chief fame and importance in the development of the spiritualist philosophy rests upon his thesis on "*The Contingency of the Laws of Nature*." In 1894, he published a course of lectures given at the Sorbonne in the years 1892-3, *On the Idea of Natural Law*, a book which in some respects supplements the thesis. There was a demand for the republication of the thesis in the following year. This was mainly due to the fact that the work of Ravaisson and Lachelier was attaining a recognition formerly denied to it. Also the book of Henri

Bergson, one of Boutroux's pupils, on *Les Données immédiates de la Conscience* (or to give it its more descriptive English title *Time and Free-Will*) had appeared in 1889. The masterpiece of Blondel, *L'Action*, came in 1893. It was seen how important were Boutroux's ideas in relation to the development of this current of thought. He had combined the attitude of Ravaisson with that adopted by Lachelier. The totality of the laws of the universe manifests, according to Boutroux, a contingency. No explanation of those laws is possible apart from a free spiritual activity. The stress laid upon the contingency of the laws of nature thus leads up to the question of freedom and to the philosophy of a spiritual activity indicated in the later thought of Bergson, Le Roy and Blondel. In addition the critique of science which marks Boutroux's work profoundly influenced thinkers like Hannequin, Payot and Milhaud,<sup>1</sup> and in the twentieth century appears in the work of Duhem and of Boutroux's brother-in-law, Henri Poincaré, whose books on science and the philosophy behind the sciences are well known.

Boutroux has certain affinities in his attitude to science with two thinkers whom we have already mentioned, Renouvier and Comte. This is because of his insistence upon the discontinuity of the sciences, upon the element of "newness" found in each which prevents the higher from being deduced from the lower, or the superior explained entirely by reference to the inferior. Boutroux opposes Spencer's doctrines and is a keen antagonist of Taine and his claim to deduce all from one formula. Such a notion as that of Taine is quite absurd according to Boutroux, for there is no necessary bond between one and another science.

<sup>1</sup> Hannequin's notable work is the "*Essai Critique sur l'Hypothèse des Atomes*," 1896.

Payot's chief book is "*La Croyance*," 1896, while Milhaud's critique of science is contained in his "*Essai sur le Condition et les Limites de la Certitude Logique*," 1894, and in the volume, "*Le Rationnel*," 1898.



This is Boutroux's main point in *La Contingence des Lois de la Nature*.

By a survey of laws of various types, logical, mathematical, physical, chemical, biological, psychological and sociological, Boutroux endeavors to show that they are constructions built up from facts. Just as nature offers to the scientist facts for data, so the sciences themselves offer these natural laws as data to the philosopher for his constructed explanation of things which is metaphysics.

"In the actual condition of our knowledge," he remarks, "science is not one, but multiple; science conceived as embracing all the sciences is a mere abstraction," a remark which recalls Renouvier's witty saying, "I should very much like to meet this person I hear so much about called 'Science.'" We have only sciences, each working after its own manner upon a small portion of reality. Man has a thirst for knowledge, and he sees, says Boutroux, in the world an "*ensemble*" of facts of infinite variety. These facts man endeavors to observe, analyze, and describe with increasing exactness. Science, he points out, is just this description.

It is futile to attempt a resolution of all things into the principle of identity. "The world is full of a number of things," and therefore, argues Boutroux, the formula  $A=B$  can never be strictly and absolutely true. "Nature never offers to us identities but only resemblances." This has important bearing upon the law of causality of which the sciences make so much. For there is such a degree of heterogeneity in the things to which the most elementary and general laws of physics and chemistry are applied that it is impossible to say that the consequent is proportional to the antecedent, that is to say, it is impossible to work out absolutely the statement that an effect is the unique result of a certain invariable cause. The fundamental link escapes us, and so for us there is a certain contingency in

experience. There is, further, a creativeness, a newness which is unforeseeable. The passage from the inorganic to the organic stresses this, for the observation of the former would never lead us to the other, for it is a creation, a veritable "new" thing. Boutroux is here dealing hard blows at Taine's conception. He continues it by showing that in the conscious living being we are introduced to a new element which is again absolutely irreducible to physical factors. Life, and consciousness too, are both creators. The life of the mind is absolutely "sui generis," it cannot be explained by physiology, by reflex action, or looked upon as merely an epiphenomenon. Already Boutroux finds himself facing the central problem of Freedom. He recognizes that as psychological phenomena appear to contain qualities not given in their immediate antecedent, the law of proportion of cause to effect does not apply to the actions of the human mind.

The principle of causality and the principle of the conservation of energy are in themselves scientific "shibboleths," and neither of them, asserts Boutroux, can be worked out so absolutely as to justify themselves as ultimate descriptions of the universe. They are valuable as practicable maxims for the scientists, whose object is to follow the threads of action in this varied world of ours. They are incomplete and have merely a relative value. Philosophy cannot permit their application to the totality of this living, pulsing universe. For cause, we must remember, does not in its strictly scientific meaning imply creative power. The cause of a phenomenon is itself a phenomenon. "The positive sciences in vain pretend to seize the divine essence or reason behind things."<sup>2</sup> They arrive at descriptive formulae and there they leave us. But, as Boutroux well reminds us in conclusion to his thesis, formulae never explain anything, because they cannot even ex-

<sup>2</sup> *Contingence des Lois de la Nature*, p. 154.

plain themselves. They are simply constructions made by observation and abstraction and which themselves require explanation.

The laws of nature are not restrictions which have been, as it were, imposed upon her. They are themselves products of freedom, they are in her what habits are to the individual. Their constancy is like the stability of a river-bed which the freely running stream at some early time hollowed out.

Boutroux, summing up his thesis, indicates clearly in his concluding chapter, his belief in contingency, freedom and creativeness. The old adage, "Nothing is lost, nothing is created," to which science seems inclined to attach itself, has not an absolute value, for in the hierarchy of creatures contingency, freedom, newness appear in the higher ranks. There is at work, no doubt, a principle of conservation, but this must not lead us to deny the existence and action of another principle, that of creation. The world rises from inorganic to organic forms, from matter to spirit and in man himself from mere sensibility up to intelligence with its capacity for criticizing and observing, and to will capable of acting upon things, modifying them by freedom.

Boutroux inclines to a doctrine of finalism somewhat after the manner of Ravaisson. The world for him is attracted to an end, the beautiful and the good are ideals seeking to be realized, but this belief in finality does not, he expressly maintains, exclude contingency. To illustrate this, Boutroux uses a metaphor from seamanship: the sailors in a ship have a port to make for, yet their adaptations to the weather and sea "*en route*" permit of contingency along with the finality involved in their making for port. "So it is with beings in nature. They have not merely the one end, to exist amid the obstacles and difficulties around them, they have an ideal to realize, and this

ideal consists in approaching to God, to his likeness each after his kind. The ideal varies with the creatures, because each has his special nature and can only imitate God in and by his own nature.”<sup>3</sup>

Boutroux’s doctrine of freedom and contingency is not opposed to a teleological conception of the universe, and in this respect he stands in contrast to Bergson, who, in the rigorous application of his theory of freedom, rules out all question of teleology. With Renouvier and with Bergson, however, Boutroux agrees in maintaining that this freedom which is the basis of contingency in things is not and cannot be a datum of experience, directly or indirectly, because experience only seizes things which are actually realized, whereas this freedom is a creative power, anterior to the act. Heredity, instinct, character and habit are words by which we must not be misled or overawed into a disbelief in freedom. They are not absolutely fatal and fully determined. The same will, insists Boutroux, which has created a habit *can* conquer it. Will must not be paralyzed by bowing to the assumed supremacy of instincts or habits. Habit itself is not a contradiction of spontaneity, it is itself a result of spontaneity, a state of spontaneity itself, and does not exclude contingency or freedom.

Metaphysics can therefore, according to Boutroux, construct a philosophy of freedom based on the doctrine of contingency. The supreme principles according to this philosophy will be laws, not those of the positive sciences, but the laws of beauty and goodness, expressing in some measure the divine life and supposing free agents. In fact, the triumph of the good and the beautiful will result in the replacement of laws of nature, strictly so called, by the free efforts of wills tending to perfection, that is to God.

Further studies upon the problem of freedom are to be found in Boutroux’s lectures given at the Sorbonne in

<sup>3</sup> *La Contingence des Lois de la Nature*, p. 158.

1892-3 in the course entitled *De l'Idée de la Loi naturelle dans la Science et la Philosophie contemporaines*." He there recognizes in freedom the crucial question at issue between the scientists and the philosophers, for he states the object of this course of lectures as being a critical examination of the notion we have of the laws of nature, with a view to determining the situation of human personality, particularly in regard to free action.<sup>4</sup> Boutroux recognizes that when the domain of science was less extensive and less rigorous than it is now it was much easier to believe in freedom. The belief in Destiny possessed by the ancients has faded, but we may well ask ourselves, says Boutroux, whether modern science has not replaced it by a yet more rigorous fatalism. He argues that modern determinism rests upon two assumptions, namely, that mathematics is a perfectly intelligible science and is the expression of absolute determinism, also that mathematics can be applied with exactness to reality. These assumptions the lecturer shows to be unjustifiable. Mathematics and experience can never be fitted exactly into each other, for there are elements in our experience, in our own nature, which cannot be mathematically expressed. This Boutroux well emphasizes in his lecture (XIII) upon sociological laws, where he asserts that history cannot be regarded as the unrolling of a single law, nor can the principle of causality strictly speaking be applied to it. An antecedent certainly may be an influence, but not a cause as properly understood. He here agrees with Renouvier's position and attitude to history.

Instead of the ideal of science, a mathematical unity, experience shows us, Boutroux affirms, a hierarchy of beings, manifesting variety and spontaneity, in short, freedom. So far, therefore, from modern science being an advocate of universal determinism it is really, when rightly

<sup>4</sup> *De l'Idée de la Loi naturelle*, Lecture IV, p. 29.

regarded, a demonstration, not of necessity but of freedom. Boutroux's treatment of the problem of freedom thus demonstrates very clearly its connection with that of science, and also with that of progress. His doctrine of contingency is directly opposed to any rigid pre-ordained plan of reality or progress, but it does not prevent the spirit from a creative teleology, the formation of a plan as it advances. This is precisely, is it not, that creative determinism, the combination of free action and of teleology which we find in our own lives? Boutroux is thus able to side with Ravaisson in his claim to see tendencies to beauty and truth and goodness, the fruits of the spirit, which it creates and to which it draws us, while at the same time he maintains freedom in a manner quite as emphatic as Lachelier, and he carefully reminds us that "not all developments are towards perfection."

The world is an assembly of beings and its vitality and nature cannot be expressed in a formula. It comprises a hierarchy of creatures, rising from inorganic to organic forms, from matter to spirit, and in man it displays an observing intelligence, rising above mere sensibility and expressly modifying things by free will. In this conception Boutroux follows Ravaisson and he is also influenced by that thinker's belief in a spiritual power of goodness and beauty. He thus leads us to the sphere of religion and philosophy, both of which endeavor in their manner to complete the inadequacy of the purely scientific standpoint. He thus stands linked up in the total development with Cournot and Renouvier, and in his own group with Lachelier also, in regard to this question of science.

We have said that much of Boutroux's work was critical of science and that the critique of science was carried on by several other thinkers. These, however, were not always in line with the spiritualist development of thought. They represent rather a sub-current running out and sep-

arated from the main stream in which Boutroux's thought flowed. This is shown prominently in the fact that while Boutroux's critique of science is in the interests of a valid idealism and the maintenance of some spiritual values, much of the subsequent criticism of science is a mere empiricism, which, being divorced from the general principles of the new spiritualist philosophy, tends merely to accentuate a vein of uncertainty, indeed, scepticism of knowledge. Such is the general standpoint taken by Milhaud, Payot and Duhem.

Boutroux's aim was not of this kind. His critique of science was a serious task not undertaken in any light spirit, but it was only a means to an end. The end for him was the indication of the principles of a truly spiritual philosophy, not one which, like that of Cousin, suffered from vagueness and had no place for science with which it found itself in conflict, but a valid idealism which could boast of having passed so to speak through the fire, the discipline of strict scientific principles, and attained triumphantly a position beyond them, but not in opposition to them. This Boutroux rightly realized to be the task of philosophy in his own and other lands.

Boutroux's devotion to *La Nature* did not obscure his study of *L'Esprit*. He looked upon life steadily and endeavored to see it whole. He was fully conscious of the importance of those disciplines of the human mind which make for the study of spiritual ideals and values other than those which are contained in the narrow rationalism of the positive sciences. He wrote on ethics, on education and on religion. From his pen came the preface to the French edition of William James' work on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.<sup>5</sup> Boutroux delighted in the study of Jacob Boehme, the old German mystic. In the interesting conclusion to his book on *Science and Religion in Contem-*

<sup>5</sup> He also wrote a monograph on James.

*porary Philosophy*, Boutroux, after affirming that the essential piety of religion is found in all searchings of man's spirit for truth, for goodness and beauty, sums up in the words of the old mystic his attitude to the diversity of religious opinions. "Consider the birds in our forests, they praise God each in his own way, in diverse tones and fashions. Think you God is vexed by this diversity and desires to silence discordant voices? All the forms of being are dear to the Infinite Being Himself." Boutroux was too clear and well balanced to adopt towards religion the hostile attitude of the French thinkers of the eighteenth century. They thought that the human mind would very quickly come to reject all that could not be proved true on strictly rational grounds. They sadly miscalculated the bases upon which religion reposes; they stressed with consequent disaster and reaction one aspect of the human consciousness to the exclusion of others the emotions and the will. Boutroux recognized this, and, while the mind could have been more intellectually clear and honest, he realized the limitations of a severe rationalism which should ignore the other elements in man's nature. Consequently, his mind went back, not to the doctrines of Voltaire, but to the thought of Pascal, which clung devotedly to science as well as religion; he went back also to that doctrine of "Nous" which was a feature of Greek thought at its best. To the Greek mind this conception did not imply merely a cold exercise of intellect or rationalizing power. The "Nous" or supreme quality of mind lay in a harmony, a balance of the whole mind with its powers of knowing and of feeling and willing. This was indeed the Supreme Beauty, seeking to ally itself at once with both Truth and Goodness.



Boutroux indeed went back for these fundamental principles but only in order to project into the future what he thought was truest and noblest among human thoughts and aspirations. In the increasing striving towards the furtherance of these ideals he saw the course of that true spiritual development, at once strictly positive and idealistic, which he himself, by his work and his personality, had done so much to promote.

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